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The Darkness and the Light

Judaism gave the world the distinction between dark and light which is everything—and is probably why so many people throughout the centuries have hated it.

By Kathleen Hayes

Published October 7, 2025

Two years. It's been two surreal years since that Saturday of watching impossible scenes unfold in Israel. The kind of gruesome savagery that seemed safely confined to the past — that of the Jews' biblical enemies, say, or medieval pogromists, or the Nazis before they learned to industrialize genocide — had been captured on the killers' own GoPro cameras and splashed across Twitter for the world to see. And we, far away, could do nothing but watch.

Who can forget the sight of Shiri Bibas surrounded by those armed men, her face a canvas of pure terror as she tried in vain to keep her two tiny red-headed boys safe? Or Naama Levy in her bloody sweatpants, dragged by the hair to the jubilant cry "Allahu Akbar!"? Or Shani Louk's broken body being driven through a mob of exuberant Gazans in the back of that pickup truck? Or all those unidentifiable bloody bodies at bus stops, front yards, children's bedrooms? It was unfathomable, but it was happening, virtually in real time across our phones.

And after that horror came the one that followed, which seemed almost more crazymaking because it toppled any belief we had in the goodness of those around us — our colleagues, neighbors and friends. Almost immediately, people around the world took to the streets — not to express their sorrow and revulsion, but their delight in the carnage. Oh, there were expressions of sympathy too, for about five minutes. The Empire State Building, Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and other global landmarks were lit up in blue and white in solidarity with Israel. Soon though, those sights had gone dark and the only light seemed to emanate from the flares protesters threw as they howled, "Globalize the intifada!"

And apart from those screams, there was the eerie silence. Schools and workplaces that always rushed out expressions of support and love to anyone suffering any kind of distress had nothing to say to their Jewish students and employees. The media lost its tepid interest in Israeli victims, and highlighted only the plight of the Palestinians as they awaited Israel's military response. American Jews — people who might have a personal connection to the murdered and kidnapped of Oct. 7 and likely felt shattered even if they didn't — felt utterly alone and friendless.

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the political left, these days brought another sense of violent estrangement, because we knew the participants of the antisemitic carnivals now taking place. I crashed out an essay with a headline I didn't expect to survive editorial scrutiny, "I Was You, 'Defender of the Palestinians,' and Now I Want to Puke." I'd been one of those Israel-hating fools most of my adult life, and although I repudiated my former views years earlier, nothing could prepare me to see what they meant in action — their actually eliminationist implications as they played out in cities around the world. I wrote about my rage and disgust and, despite myself, my shock at seeing people I'd once respected and loved engaging in unimaginable levels of depravity. And the worst of it was knowing that if not for a few chance things that happened to me midlife, I might have still been among them.

Evil takes hold so easily. These past two years we've seen it apparently slip free of whatever bonds normally hold it in check and run wild. Elderly Jews in Colorado set on fire as they peacefully demonstrated for the hostages. Synagogues around the world firebombed. The Pennsylvania governor's mansion set alight as he and his family slept during Passover. The open display of "No Jews" signs in shops and other establishments. A pogrom in Amsterdam. A young couple shot dead as they emerged from a Jewish museum in Washington, D.C. Last week in Manchester, the car-ramming and stabbing of Jews entering a synagogue for Yom Kippur services, killing two. On and on the list of atrocities goes, and even if the current Gaza war ends — as I hope and which now looks possible — I'm not optimistic that the Jew-haters will do more than slightly curtail their spree. They've grown addicted to it.

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I'll forever have to grapple with how this darkness found such a place in my heart. My parents had taught me the difference between right and wrong, but without belief in God it couldn't withstand the question, "Says who?" When morality is secularized, wrested completely from religion, it can only be subjective — which is to say, it's all too easy to punch giant holes in it. Some people manage to lead upright, purposeful lives without believing in God, and seem mostly fine with it. But there will also always be people like me — folks who can't manage life without a sense of the transcendent, and aim to dismantle everything trying to achieve that. In today's West, where people enjoy unprecedented levels of wealth, health, security and comfort, there seems to be only an ever-accelerating drive to extinguish ourselves.

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Unlike in my younger days, I don't claim to know the fix for this. But although I haven't managed to find faith in God, I see the wisdom of beginning to behave as if I do. I've spent these past High Holy Days reflecting and atoning, and the place to do this has been among Jews, the people of my mother's family', who seem to have forgiven and accepted me despite everything. This was the year I fell in love with Avinu Malkeinu, heard the shofar blasts in synagogue for the first time, fasted and attended the Yom Kippur service from Kol Nidre to Neilah. I can't claim I had a spiritual epiphany, but sometimes I felt a certain clarity and peace, and that was more than enough.

Two days later I received an invitation from Judea Pearl, an ebullient, wonderful man I'm blessed to consider a friend. He asked me to join him and three others around a table for Havdalah, the ceremony ushering out Shabbat. At first we talked, inevitably, of antisemitism and Zionism, and sang, as one always sings with Judea. Then it was time for the ceremony. Judea blessed a glass of wine, symbolizing joy and abundance, and passed around jars of fragrant spices to refresh the soul, which is saddened by the departure of Shabbat.

Finally one of us lit the candle. Judea showed us how to hold our hands in front of it, weaving our fingers through each other so the flame showed between the cracks. Jews do this, he explained, in order to differentiate between the darkness and the light — that we may always know the difference between the two.

I think that is, in essence, what Judaism gave the world — that distinction which is everything — and is probably why so many people throughout the centuries have hated it. Still we keep lighting candles, mindful to leave room at the table for the fallen to find their way to the light.

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